

# Nature blogging – a personal perspective

*What role can blogs play in debate on nature conservation and how influential might they be in affecting change, both directly and through longer-term diffusion of ideas? This article takes a personal look at the motivations for blogging and the experience of grappling with nature's expanding blogosphere.*

## MILES KING

### Nattering on nature

It's a little over three years now since I wrote my first blog while at the Grasslands Trust. I had been following Mark Avery's blog, when he was still Conservation Director at RSPB. I thought to myself "well I can do that" and, always having a lot to say (and thinking far too highly of my own opinions) it felt like a natural step to start writing.

I had a considerable degree of freedom in what I did at the Grasslands Trust, so I was able to develop the blog as part of my job, as opposed to doing it in my spare time. I generally tried to keep to topics relevant to conservation, grasslands and livestock, and consciously used it to promote messages that reflected TGT's position on issues. I wouldn't go as far as to say I stuck to the corporate line, because there were very few corporate lines to which I felt obliged to stick. It was a small dynamic organisation, with effectively no membership. The CEO and Trustees were happy with what I was writing, and I was definitely exercising an element of self-censorship, to make sure they continued to be happy.

It's always gratifying to have your work noted and referenced (less so when it's just picked up and not referenced) by others, such as journalists. Partly because it validates what you're doing, but also gets your messages out to a wider audience and increases your readership. I had a couple of stories used in this way during the first year of blogging – one on hedgerow and grassland destruction in Northern Ireland, which was picked up by George Monbiot in his blog for *the Guardian*, and another on innovative approaches to reducing nitrogen pollution from farmland, picked up by Louise Gray in *the Telegraph*. Just as I was writing this article, I discovered to my amazement that my blog was referenced in a *Guardian* leader article on CAP reform. Ironically the article referred back to my previous *ECOS* article "Any Room for Scrub" which appeared 12 years ago!

### Twitter - who needs it?

Many people don't like twitter, turn their noses up at it and generally dismiss it as trivial. I think this is partly because of the name, and also due to the presence of celebrities and their followers, hanging on their ever, mostly vacuous, word.

The fact that it is also the favourite hangout of politicians and media types, puts many people off - quite understandably. However, it is a great place to publicise your concerns, your campaigns and your views. I have been on twitter since 2009, starting off with The Grasslands Trust, then more recently as myself. Twitter put TGT on the map and gave it public profile in a way that would not have been possible, for example just using a website alone. Bringing together a regularly updated blog, a regularly used Twitter account, and a regularly refreshed website can provide the sort of material that keeps your members or audience interested and engaged. Potentially it can lead to real change through activist engagement with politicians and the media. Although Save Our Trees and subsequently 38 Degrees were successful in using Twitter and social media to garner support for the forestry anti-privatisation campaign, I suspect the use of social media by opponents of the badger cull will turn out to be equally significant in the long run. I would guess probably twice as many people read a blog if I have regularly tweeted about it, compared to one which I haven't. I use Twitter effectively to publicise my blog posts, and the readership can be substantially amplified if Twitter followers retweet a blog to their own followers.

Does any of this matter, or is it just a vanity project? If I was just writing about what I had for breakfast, or why I think the Great British Bake Off is rubbish, then it would be an indulgent exercise. But most of my posts are intended to do something or spark a reaction. And most of the time the point is to challenge the reader's, and my own, preconceptions.

### The re-wilding debate

One issue to which I have returned in my blogs more times than any other is the debate about re-wilding and conservation. I have always been interested in 'what went before', and where the wildlife we have in Britain came from. Or at least since I read Oliver Rackham's magisterial *The History of the Countryside* in 1987. From then, I was aware that lynx and wolves roamed the British landscape until relatively recent times; and that the landscape was a palimpsest with layers of historic land-use (and abandonment) set atop one another, century after century, millennia on millennia. I was not really that interested in the re-wilding debate when it came up about 10 years ago (despite reading about it in *ECOS*). I suppose I was too busy trying to make a living as a freelance conservation consultant to have time to think about such things.

After three years at the Grasslands Trust, where the semi-natural state of habitats was what it was all about, my preconceptions were challenged in a refreshing way thanks to an impromptu argument with journalist George Monbiot on Twitter. George was working on his book *Feral* and was on the war path against what he sees as the misplaced and craven defeatism of British nature conservation, with a focus on nature subjugated, in thrall to the dominion of man. George was having a go at nature conservation (in his inimitable way) and I was happy to argue with him. We got into quite a heated twitter debate - and this spilled over into many blog posts about the wild and the semi-natural. And it has been incredibly refreshing - I have challenged so many of my own preconceptions, and lazy thinking about

nature and what conservation is actually about. The act of writing has enabled me to step back from my own beliefs and prejudices and forced me to consider which ones are justified and which are received wisdom. I certainly haven't come round to thinking that everything George proposes is right, indeed writing the blog has given me a practice ground to try out various different ideas and positions. The value of comment is crucial on this practice ground. It is to me always a relief when I have written a post and someone has commented on it. It feels like people are thinking about what I am writing. And to have a commentator who disagrees is even better as that provides an opportunity to have a debate and to test further the ideas. I am lucky not to have attracted any real trolls to my blog, but perhaps having a troll is another badge of honour.

### The elephant in the room

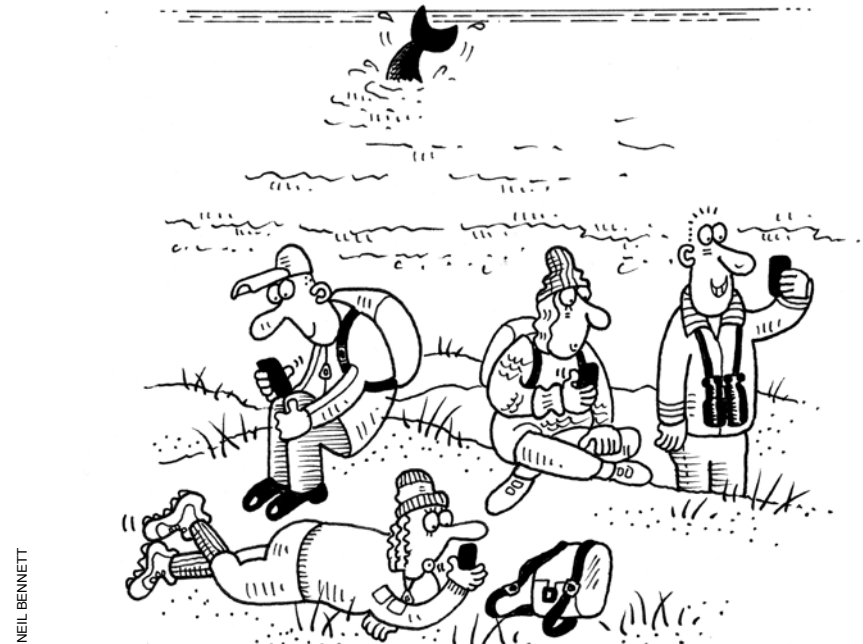
I did not escape unchanged from George's withering polemic attacks on nature conservation and Mark Fisher's gimlet like dissection of some of the sacred cows to which we cling. Indeed to some extent it was a liberating process. I had known that Pleistocene Britain supported extinct megafauna, beyond the Holocene losses of aurochs and elk. What I had not appreciated until this was pointed out to me during these discussions, was the key role of the straight-tusked elephant and the elephant coping-strategies that our native trees and shrubs had developed - which have enabled them to be coppiced and pollarded, for example.

That got me thinking about and writing (not necessarily in that order) about elephants and their role in the ecology of temperate woodlands. It struck me that the Holocene forest, or wildwood as it is romantically labelled, was actually a pale shadow of its former self in previous interglacials. Those megafauna that were the main ecosystem engineers for the entire Pleistocene (interglacials), the elephant, the rhinoceros etc had not returned. Imagine the disturbance they would have created - all forest elephants create permanent tracks (equivalent to woodland rides) and large clearings where they interact socially, called Bai. The straight-tusked was a real giant, nearly twice as big as extant forest elephants.

I had a minor epiphany. For years I had struggled to understand how our species of open habitats (that Fisher and Monbiot decry as pseudo-natural) had survived in the closed temperate forests of the Holocene. Accepting sadly that the seductive lure of Hans Vera's theory of savannah did not stand up to close scrutiny, it occurred to me that we were looking in the wrong place (or rather time) to find the pre-human origins of open habitats. And in that sense, we were now the elephants, creating clearings, coppicing trees, making lots of muddy wet places where the sun gets in. Of course human land-use has taken that to an extreme in Britain. But it also means that woodlands left to their own devices, without any disturbance are as artificial as meadows. And people get upset about wild boar damage! Imagine what a rhino would have done...

### Future green blogging and social media

I increasingly feel that random events have such a profound effect on the future that futurology is a pointless exercise, and just another example of humanity's hubris.



That's not to say I think it's pointless trying to affect how things are going to change - far from it. I sometimes feel that writing in mildly creative ways is a neat way to influence things, and far less soul destroying than the more formal world of policy proposals, consultations and submissions, which add up to continually banging your head against the metaphorical wall of political indifference, inertia or ignorance.

I will continue to blog for the foreseeable future. I don't have a huge audience and would like more people to read what I write. As someone who is opinionated and interested in all sorts of different things, I rarely run out of things to say. I do sometimes run out of time or lose the desire to write, if there are many other things happening, or where mental and emotional energy is used elsewhere. The intersection between politics, the environment and the media is an interesting and fluid place, so it's a good place to go round picking up morsels of information, ideas and opinions.

I predict social media will be increasingly important to the future environment sectors - no magic mirror needed there. It's difficult to imagine that Facebook, blogs, LinkedIn, Twitter and websites will stay as separate entities for any great length of time. Whatever Social Media morphs into, it will be an ever more effective way for those with a view or a proposal, to engage with the public, specific communities, and organisation's members, as well as an ever larger thief of time. Will organisations even have members in the traditional sense in future? Sounds like a good idea for a blog...

**Miles King** has been making trouble in nature conservation for the past 27 years. He has been conservation director of Plantlife, The Grasslands Trust and Buglife. He was partly responsible for the BAP process, for which he partly apologises.

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### **Embracing the green blogosphere**

**Leeds University geography students were asked to follow up Miles King's perspective, by provided views on how they use blogs and social media in their learning and discussions on nature...**

As a student I find environmental blogs incredibly useful for the context of academic research. They enable me to develop and increase my understanding of a specific issue, along with potential arguments and discrepancies, prior to following up published academic literature. It is rare for a blog topic to be on a subject reading list, with journals favouring textbooks. Since participating in a blog as part of an assessed course module I believe there is scope for it to be incorporated into seminars, or even replace them, due to the ability to debate and raise ones issues whilst also simultaneously use facts and figures from other online resources. Perhaps institutes should embrace modern communication systems, as swapping ideas in this way can lead to new research and discoveries.

**Richard Hart**

As part of the assessment for a module I am studying at university my peers and I have been encouraged to blog and debate about the topics brought up at the recent wildlife conference: Wild10. This has helped us to really engage with the topics covered in the module. Not only this, it has opened up new depths of topics that I personally feel I would have missed by just reading academic literature. However, while they are very useful for the learning and sharing of opinions like this, blogs are often disregarded as a means of referencing scientific work. As they are largely based on the opinion of the writer and not backed up by references they cannot be used as a basis for a scientific report.

**Esme Shattock**

To me nature is about being outside, experiencing it first hand and not through another IT information screen. One may become addicted to social media, although many people use it but do not become tied to it. I believe it can encourage young people to learn about the basics of nature. I remember first reading about poaching in national geographic and becoming emotive on the subject. Perhaps this realisation of problems, wonders and how to get involved is now found on these social media sites. The official Wild10 youtube video still makes me feel passionate about wilderness in which a journal article never could. However, progress is not going to be entirely made from social media alone and other literature still has important contributions to make.

**Richard Hart**